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ABSTRACT

A study examining the writing processes of five college students for whom English was a second language is reported. The students were labeled "unskilled" writers because of their inability to pass a university writing proficiency test. The study looked at: (1) the composing behaviors these students exhibited; (2) the conscious composing strategies they think they use; (3) the systematic composing processes implied by their behaviors and conscious strategies; (4) the ways in which their writing histories have influenced the way they compose; and (5) what their texts reveal about these systematic composing processes. Data were collected from writing samples and interviews. Based on those observations, a three-stage process of writing skill development is outlined and the personal characteristics, language proficiency, composing process, ability to handle content, and instructional needs of writers at each stage are described. Implications for writing instruction are discussed. (MSE)

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# "Case Studies of 'Unskilled' ESL College Writers: An Hypothesis about Stages of Development"

based on

"Case Studies of the Composing Processes of 'Unskilled' English-as-a-Second-Language College Writers",

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Doctoral Dissertation
New York University, 1985

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"Case Studies of 'Unskilled' ESL College Writers:
An Hypothesis about Stages of Development"

In "What Unskilled ESL Students Do as They Write: A Classroom Study of Composing", Ann Raimes(1985) reports on a study which, after comparing her findings to those of some major studies of the composing process, led her to certain conclusions "about the specific needs of unskilled ESL student writers." Raimes found that 1) there is a problem with defining "unskilled" in relation to ESL students, 2) language proficiency, demonstrated writing ability, and the number of years that students have been in an English-speaking environment may vary despite placement in the same class, and 3) texts may not reflect the sophistication of writers. Raimes describes "unskilled" ESL students who are committed to their texts, write a lot, and are not preoccupied with error at the expense of their ideas.

The study (Brooks, 1985) I will describe in this article attempted a similar task to Raimes', to explore and describe the composing processes of five "unskilled" ESL college students. My findings lead me to agree with the three points from the Raimes study mentioned above; however, some of our findings were <u>not</u> the same, such as degree of committment to writing, amount of writing, or preoccupation with error. One of the most striking points that arose during the study I did was the question of the students' "skill," or lack thereof.

The students I worked with were considered "unskilled" because they were all enrolled in the same advanced ESL pre-freshmen

composition course due to their inability to pass a university-wide writing proficiency test, as were the students described in the Raimes study. However, as will be seen below, these writers were not equally "unskilled." In fact, the five can be seen as representing a range of skills and knowledge of composing, arranged (See Table 1 of Participant Characteristics) from the least proficient (Sandy) through to the most (Norma).

Raimes states that the students she studied were "accurately" placed. Perhaps "no clear profile of unskilled ESL writers emerged" from her study because although placement into a developmental writing course was "accurate" in that these ESL writers (in both the Raimes study and this one) were unskilled in some respect, i.e. not yet ready or proficient enough for freshmen composition, they also were not equally unskilled as writers.

Raimes initially used the same definition for "unskilled" that Perl (1978), Lay (1982) and I did: students who had not yet passed the City University of New York Writing Assessment Test (CWAT; See Bruffee, Cole & Gonzales, 1980). Possibly this holistically-scored test, used to place <u>all</u> incoming students, does not distinguish finely enough the differences among ESL students. Since the participants in my study seem to represent a range of skills and knowledge of composing, if we take into consideration the patterns of similarity and difference among these five ESL writers and those from studies of other writers (Emig, 1971; Perl, 1978; Pianko, 1979; Chelala, 1981; Peitzman, 1981; Sommers, 1981; Lay, 1982; Zamel, 1982) , both proficient and less proficient as well as native and non-native, we can hypothesize stages that writers pass through while developing proficiency in composing. We need to

look at both bodies of literature (native and non-native) which are developing because ESL students may be developing simultaneously as writers and language users.

The Classroom Study: Purposes

The following questions guided the research initially:

1. What composing behaviors do ESL writers exhibit?
2. What conscious composing strategies do ESL writers think they use?
3. What systematic composing processes are implied by the behaviors and conscious strategies of ESL writers?
4. How have their writing histories influenced the way they compose?
5. What do their texts reveal about their systematic composing processes?

Participants for this study were selected from among the population of ESL students who had not passed the CUNY Writing Assessment Test, but they were chosen from among the students in my advanced ESL composition course in order to develop the relationship and trust which might come from working together on a day-to-day basis that enhance case-study, process research. I explained to the participants that it would be a collaborative effort so that both teacher and student might learn more about how students compose through observation of the composing process, interviews, and reflecting on the written texts. The students were told there would be four sessions, each taking place individually with me outside of class, with 90 minutes allowed for each session. During the first two sessions, the

students were given an hour to write and a half hour was spent on a post-writing interview. Although I recognized the limits imposed on students who only had an hour within which to compose an essay, I considered it a necessary but reasonable constraint of the research situation and a time limit to which college students were accustomed by in-class exams. The third and fourth sessions did not always require the full 90 minutes as the students did not write during these sessions. The third session was used for an interview about the student's writing history, and the fourth for a post-writing interview about the student's third paper, which had been written at home between the third and fourth sessions. Each session took place approximately 1 to 2 weeks apart over a 4 to 8 week period.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

| Participant | Country of Origin & Language(s) | Studied Writing in (Language) | Age at Arrival | Age at Study |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sandy (F) | Hong Kong, Cantonese | Cantonese (4th grade)<br>English (5th grade +) | 10 | 18 |
| Mirlande (F) | Haiti, Creole & French | French (6th grade)<br>English (7th grade +) | 12 | 18 |
| Roxana (F) | El Salvador, Spanish | Spanish (2 yrs. h.s.)<br>English (1 yr. h.s.) | 17 | 21 |
| Kwong-Uie (M) | Malaysia, Mandarin, English & Malay | Mandarin (primary)<br>English (secondary)<br>& some Malay | 22 | 22 |
| Norma (F) | Haiti, Creole & French | French (post h.s.)<br>English (2 yrs.) | 27 | 28 |

The first topic was "to describe an important event or experience in your life and why it was important," chosen for its familiarity to students who might be nervous and to permit an opportunity for writing reflectively. Students were asked to "report-in"; in other words, students were not instructed to think out loud continuously, but they determined when they would "report in" to the tape recorder if they stopped to think or plan before beginning to write or if they paused to rest, reread, or plan during the composing process. Students were given a guide sheet which explained "reporting-in," adapted from Peitzman's (1981) study. "Reporting-in" was an adaptation of the composing-aloud method which had been used in other case studies of composing processes (Chelala, 1981; Emig, 1971; Perl, 1978) because, although both composing aloud and reporting-in are intended to provide access to a writer's cognitive strategies and to be a way of reconstructing the writing process, I was interested (similar to Peitzman) in "a research design that allowed as much leeway and flexibility as possible" and yet "captured some of the strategies and processes not evident from written drafts while enabling students to compose 'as usual'." During the first two sessions, while students wrote, I noted their behavior while composing. When students decided they had finished writing or the time was up, I taped the post-writing discussion. (See Post-writing Session Questions in Appendix) Before the second session, students were asked to read an article from their textbook ("Occupational Choice and adjustment" by Coleman, 1983) upon which the second writing task would be based.

During the second session, students were again given an hour to write and asked to report in. The topic for the second session, to

discuss the problems they had faced or were facing in their attempt to make a career choice, was chosen to permit an opportunity for writing an essay based on the text students had read; they were told they might refer to the text, such as making use of the author's "Characteristics of the Individual", while writing. I followed the same procedures outlined above for Session One. At the end of the second session, students were told there would be no writing during the third session, but that they might bring any past writing samples they would like to share; they were also asked, in preparation for Session Three, to reflect on memories and perceptions of writing and writing instruction.

The third session was an open-ended interview to develop a writing profile of the students. (See Personal Interview Questions in Appendix) In addition to my questions, students were able to provide additional information or comments. The interview allowed for discussion of how the students had learned to write and read in both their first language and English, what kinds of writing and reading they did or had done in both languages, what the writers considered to be their strengths and weaknesses when writing in either language, and their image of a "good writer."

At the end of the third session, the writers were asked to think about and write on a topic of their choice at home, reporting-in to a tape recorder, between the third and fourth sessions. They brought the text and tape to the fourth session. This assignment allowed insight into how, if at all, the writers' processes may have altered when writing under different circumstances and allowed to choose their own topic for writing. I also noted effects of these changes (place of composing and choice of topic) in the text produced.

Although students did not write during the fourth session, I followed the same procedures for the post-writing discussion of Sessions One and Two outlined above. Before ending the session, I asked about the difference between composing in front of me on assigned topics and composing at home on a topic of the writers' choice, including the difference between having a time limit and having a more flexible, self-regulated time schedule. At the end of the four sessions, I had collected the following data on each student: notes from participant-observation, tapes of the students' reporting-in and interviews, written texts as well as any pre-writing notes made, and student data questionnaires.

I transcribed from the tapes and then read each text while listening again to the tape of the post-writing interview to note any differences between what the students had said and the text. I also noted any comments students had made as to problems caused by their imitations in English and whatever strategies they may have used, explicitly or implicitly, in attempting to overcome the problem(s). The reporting-in tapes were useful in analyzing and interpreting students' strategies, especially as students had been told they might report-in in either their first language or English; I was able to gain insight into at what points or for what reasons the writers might have been thinking in their first language.

The written texts were examined to see if they could be categorized, if they served a particular function. Britton's (1978) functional categories (expressive, poetic, transactional) were a useful starting point to see if, as Peitzman (1981) had found, the writer's "processes and strategies varied with the function the entire piece was

meant to serve." In addition, I examined the editing changes made: types of changes (adding, deleting, substituting, and rearranging) as well as unresolved problems which remained in the text (Perl, 1978). I also noted the length of each text (total number of words, sentences, and paragraphs), the number of changes, and the number of problems left unresolved in the text which the writer either had been unable to improve or had not noticed.(See Table 2, Participants' Texts)

Although I had begun by studying each piece of writing and the process that preceded it by considering each text in chronological order (process of writing, text, post-writing discussion of the text), the actual formulation of an understanding of each writer, individually, was based on moving back and forth among the different sources of data collected. Once I had analyzed and interpreted the data from each writer individually, and noted individual patterns or variations, I compared all of the writers' processes to see if any hypotheses could be formulated. In addition, I compared the findings of this research with the findings of previous, similar types of studies.

Table 2

Participants' Texts

| Participant | Average Length (1st 2) | (all 3) | Average Time (1st 2) | (3rd) | Average Number of: Paragraphs | Sentences | Errors |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sandy | 178 | 183 | 13min. | 75min. | 3 | 12 | 15 |
| Mirlande | 201 | 224 | 33min. | 60min. | 4 | 9 | 10 |
| Roxana | 255 | 245 | 22min. | 70min. | 3 | 11 | 17 |
| Kwong-Uie | 525 | 493 | 50min. | 70min. | 5 | 25 | 46 |
| Norma | 355 | 520 | 60min. | 3hrs. | 6 | 27 | 26 |

* The text length expected for their level was 250-300 words.

## Findings

### Composing Process

Writers varied in the amount of time spent composing and in how that time was used. There was a positive correlation between the time spent composing and writing proficiency. More proficient writers re-read and revised more. They also felt the pressure of time more keenly because they always had a lot to write and were able to distance from and assess their texts given enough time. Less proficient writers chose to limit texts out of disinterest or fear. When the writers were given more control of composing (a self-chosen topic and self-paced), all spent more time planning and re-working their texts.

All the students saw writing as a means of influencing or informing others, but their strategies for visualizing an audience and anticipating its needs varied. Students acknowledged using questions (self-formulated or from a text), reading, or brief outlines as tools for generating, organizing and reshaping ideas while composing. Less proficient writers thought they were organizing their texts in terms of a formula which called for an "introduction, body and conclusion"; they also chose to limit their texts out of disinterest or fear.

More proficient writers appeared to compose on at least two levels: primarily, getting ideas onto paper and secondarily, revising and refining what they had written;less proficient writers seemed to try to do both simultaneously. For more proficient writers, pauses in composing were used to generate, link or refine ideas, while for less proficient writers pauses were indicative of trouble with the mechanics of writing. When a task was unfamiliar or a subject was uncomfortable for the less proficient writers, they had more difficulty composing.

In contrast, more proficient writers were able to devise means of entering and developing their texts by formulating connections between the task and previous experience. Less proficient writers relied heavily on personal experience as content when composing, while more proficient writers made use of a greater variety of sources and strategies for developing ideas. In addition, the latter group took more risks, linguistically and rhetorically, varying their composing process to suit the purpose they envisioned and, which seems particularly important for language learners and users, taking pleasure in their use of language.

Students who had read and written extensively in one language were able to bring those competencies to writing in English. They had developed a sense of audience, a variety of composing strategies, and a fund of implicit models. Furthermore, through previous experience, more proficient writers had come to identify with their texts and see them as a means of representing themselves to others. Length of time in the United States and fluency in spoken English were not indicative of competency with written English. More proficient writers in this study were able to make use of their first language as a resource to guide decisions about forms of language through comparison. Less proficient writers relied on what they had heard to guide decisions about written language, while more proficient writers made use of both what they had heard and seen. If students had not developed competence with written discourse in any language, they had difficulty performing competently in English.

Texts

The briefest texts were written by the less proficient writers

writers, but the texts alone did not accurately reveal individual students' sophistication or thinking ability, as both Chelala (1981) and Raimes (1985) found, especially for students who were able to say a great deal more than they could write. Nonetheless, studying several texts written by the same writer indicated information about the writer's composing process.

The texts of less proficient writers were formulaic and close inspection showed they were often about personal experience, reporting events or reflecting on feelings without analysis of cause and effect, conclusions drawn from the experience of others or reading, or synthesis of different pieces of information. The formula used in the texts of less proficient writers indicates some awareness of what they think is expected, but the texts reflect little understanding of how to use details, develop context or organize material, particularly non-chronological material. In addition, these texts frequently contained fewer changes than those of more proficient writers, and changes were on the word- or phrase-level, indicating editing rather than revision and focus on parts of a text rather than a sense of the text as a whole. The language in the less proficient texts is closer to spoken, colloquial language than to written, academic discourse, and there is less variety of vocabulary, sentence and paragraph structure. Furthermore, although in this study the more proficiently written texts contained more language errors, the number of errors seemed often a result of risks taken rather than less control. Finally, although almost all of the third texts were longer and included more than one draft, those of more proficient writers exhibited a greater range of abilities, both linguistic and rhetorical, more consistently throughout

the research.

Stages of Development of Writers: An Hypothesis

In the conclusion to her study, Perl (1978) includes a note of caution about case studies:

> "The focus is upon the patterns that can be detected and the conclusions that can be drawn from close scrutiny of individuals in the process of writing. The goal is to use the understanding that emerges from 'intimate contact with particular cases' as the basis for the development of theory."

One of my study's goals was to gain further insight into and understanding of how "unskilled" ESL students compose. One finding was that these students were not equally "unskilled" as writers. In fact, the similarities and differences among these five writers do not seem only to be the results of varying degrees of skills acquired; rather, the five individuals may be in different stages of development as writers.

Assuming that all human beings have a natural capacity to develop and use language, one might ask what circumstances or contexts lead some to develop and use that natural capacity more proficiently (to perform more proficiently) than others. Our ability to use language is then a human competency, not a series of discrete skills, which be nurtured and may continue to mature throughout life.

In relation to language development, one point to consider

further is the distinction between language proficiency and writing competency. Another finding of this study, which can be supported with evidence from related studies (Emig, 1971; Perl, 1978; Pianko, 1979; Chelala, 1981; Peitzman, 1981; Sommers, 1981; Lay, 1982; Zamel, 1982), is that writing abilities may be independent of language. There are students who are fluent and even fairly proficient speakers of their native language who are unskilled writers. In addition, there are ESL students, some of whom are proficient speakers of their own language and English but who are unskilled writers, and others who may lack proficiency in English to a degree, yet they are competent readers and writers, competencies which they bring to their development in English. Furthermore, Jim Cummins (1980) argues the following:

> "A dimension of cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP) can be empirically distinguished from interpersonal communicative skills such as accent and oral fluency in both L1 and L2 and that cognitive/academic proficiencies in both L1 and L2 are manifestations of the same underlying dimension."

Cummins defines CALP as "those aspects of language proficiency which are closely related to the development of literacy skills in L1 and L2." He develops the idea that L1 and L2 CALP L2 are interdependent and development of proficiency in a second languge is partially a function of the level of proficiency in the first at the time intensive exposure to the second is begun. As a result of his own theoretical framework and consistent with the findings of other studies that he examines, Cummins concludes:

> "... that older L2 learners, whose L1 CALP is better developed, manifest L2 cognitive/academic proficiency more rapidly than younger learners because it already exists in the L1 and is therefore available for use in the new context."

Cummins' conclusions are confirmed by the findings of this study. The participants who appeared to lack cognitive/academic proficiencies in their native language also lacked them in English, while the participants who had developed such proficiencies in one language were able to manifest them in English although still developing their L2 proficiency. This is not to say that the only way to develop cognitive/academic proficiencies is to do so in one's native language first. However, it implies that if a teacher recognizes that a given student lacks cognitive/academic proficiency, such proficiency must at least be developed in the second language if that is the language the student must function in. Although researchers and teachers may not yet be certain of ways with which to nurture this type of proficiency, we should be aware of whether students have developed it or not.

Composition, the written mode of language, is not simply "a matter of tacit integrations" (Watson, 1980) which may be nurtured and developed throughout our lives. As with language development in general, one might ask specifically in relation to composition whether there are noticeable characteristics that reflect stages of writers' maturation. If there are, what are the characteristics of given stages? If stages of development are noticeable, what might nurture writers' developing competencies?

Contrary to the usual approach one finds in schools, Mayher, Lester and Pradl (1983), suggest:

> "The best way to understand and encourage the interaction between the child's growing linguistic system and her emerging ability to write is to see the latter as a developmental process, which first emphasizes fluency, then clarity, and finally correctness."

Writers must first develop a sense that they can in fact 'fill the page" (fluency) before they will be concerned with making sense to others (clarity) and with whether or not their texts conform to the conventions of standard written English (correctness). In addition, the authors take care to point out that these dimensions overlap, that beginning writers have to deal with clarity and correctness to some extent and experienced writers may at times continue to struggle with fluency. (This point is painfully clear to those of us who, despite being professional teachers, have struggled with dissertations or articles for publication.) Nonetheless, they feel many writers suffer from "a correctness-first, clarity-second, and fluency-sometimes-later-if-at-all approach" to writing. Mayher, Lester and Pradl's suggested developmental process can be supported with data from this study and others of the composing processes.

These studies (L1: Emig, 1971; Perl, 1978; Pianko, 1979; Peitzman, 1981; Sommers, 1981. L1 and L2: Chelala, 1981 and Lay, 1982. L2: Zamel, 1982) were not longitudinal because they did not examine

writers developing through different stages; however, the individual researchers describe the participants in their studies as being representative of writers at particular stages of development, such as Perl's (1978) "basic writers" or Zamel's (1982) "proficient ESL writers." Each of these studies, then, provide data from which stages of development for writers may be hypothesized.

For example, Perl's (1978) study points out that unskilled native writers have a restricted, narrow manner of approach to writing tasks and precipitous concern with form breaks and inhibits their composing rhythm. Pianko (1979) notes that more traditional students pause, rescan and reflect more on their writing than remedial students do and doing so appears to stimulate the growth of consciousness in students. Brooks' findings (1985) also indicate that greater fluency, in terms of quantity of written language, does reflect greater proficiency in writers' stages of development. In addition, when writers pause during composing, the reasons for the pauses are more informative and important than the behavior itself, as both Peitzman (1981) and Brooks (1985) found. The less proficient writers in Brooks (1985) paused, often at the word- or sentence-level, because they were afraid of making mistakes, which created difficulties for maintaining their train of thought. In contrast, the more proficient writers tended to leave editing concerns until after they had drafted ideas clearly and paused while composing to clarify and sustain their train of thought.

In relation to revision and editing, Peitzman (1981) reports that writers may start to revise in the beginning stages of composing, and she distinguishes between purposive and uninformed changes that

writers make. Zamel (1982) notes that for proficient ESL writers revision was a main component of the composing process and the changes they made were beyond the sentence level. Lay's (1982) study of less proficient ESL writers indicates that, in contrast, they did not revise much and in fact three out of the five students she worked with did so only while writing. Both Zamel and Lay found the ESL writers they studied exhibited many composing strategies similar to those of native writers. In addition, Sommers (1981) also provides evidence that less proficient students generally made changes on the word- or phrase-level, while more proficient students made varied types of changes which often involved larger chunks of their texts, a finding confirmed by Brooks (1985) as well.

Raimes (1985) states that "the act of producing L2 writing in this study seemed to be so involving and exhausting that production of a new draft was rare"; however, her students "had a possible 65 minutes of composing time" and it seems that "four of the eight students wrote for longer than 45 minutes" and "only one wrote for less than 30 minutes." We cannot fully ascertain what changes students might have made under different composing circumstances. In my study, writers at more advanced stage of development exhibited behaviors and made use of strategies which reflected their ability to handle longer pieces of discourse and concerns with clarity, while less developed writers had difficulty sustaining the flow of discourse and focused on correctness.

Despite unskilled writers' concern with correctness and attempts at editing,as Perl's (1978) study and Brooks (1985) indicate, their texts generally contain many unresolved problems of form. Perl found unskilled writers rely on their intuition, even though they

mistrust it, because they are unable to make informed decisions while editing; in addition, their error-hunting prevents them from being flexible about writing and revising.

Below the hypothetized stages of development of writers are described, using the five students who participated in the study (Brooks, 1985) as examples. The hypothesis is based on a limited number of students, so there may be stages which precede or continue beyond those included here. The stages are not necessarily discrete and may overlap.

Personal Characteristics of Stage 1 Writers

ESL writers at Stage 1 may be insecure, frustrated or even hostile about composing and, consequently, be unwilling to take risks. They have limited experience and ability as readers and writers in any language; even if they have been in the United States for a long time and may be fluent speakers of English, as Sandy and Mirlande are, their proficiency in oral language may not reflect experience with or proficiency in written language. Aware of and sensitive to their limitations in relation to written language, they generally do not identify with or get satisfaction from their written texts. For example, Sandy acknowledged limiting her texts because "Nobody seems to like to read such a long piece of paper." Given their anxiety about or indifference to composing and their lack of control of it, they are frequently unwilling to invest much time in it. Mirlande, another Stage 1 writer, demonstrated her fears through the following comments:

> "I don't want to make it (her text) too long....This doesn't make sense....I don't think I should make it longer anyway. It makes less sense....I think that's

> enough. I have nothing further to say. I think that's enough, a page and a half."

Language Proficiency of Stage 1 Writers

ESL students at this stage may be fluent and fairly idiomatic oral language users, but they are limited to relatively colloquial, non-academic language in both spoken and written forms. In fact, their texts resemble speech written down. Their writing exhibits limited syntactic variations ,and they often lack appropriate rules or have an incomplete or faulty understanding of rules about written language to guide and inform their decisions. In one of her papers, Sandy made a change because it sounded "right" to her, telling me:

> "I just say this all the time. Whatever I'm writing is what I'm, usually it's what I'm saying. It's not a piece of writing, but it's a piece of talking, actually."

When a grammatical question or problem arises while writing, they tend to rely on what they have heard in an effort to resolve it; although most proficient writers may react similarly, these writers have less information from which to draw. They have generally learned English, and often their native language, primarily through speaking and listening, probably with others whose language is similar to their own, and have little experience with written language on which they can depend. Mirlande described herself as "caught in between; I'm not fully developed neither language, French or English." She also acknowledged trying to determine which form of a word to use, such as "deserve" or "deserved," by trying to hear which one was correct.

The Composing Process of Stage 1 Writers

Stage 1 ESL writers have limited and rigid ideas about composing. First, they generally think of it as something imposed on them by others, most often teachers. They also usually lack a clear sense of audience and purpose, trying to guess what teachers want. Since composing is imposed by school and is uncomfortable for them, they often spend little time on it. They may have no concept of drafting and at most simply rewrite a first draft neatly. They may pause frequently while writing to reread a word or phrase because they focus on and are afraid of making errors. Such pauses generally interrupt rather than maintain their flow of thought. Sandy said she was not aware of her paper as a whole until she reread it: "If I do stand back, I may lose what I'm writing about." They may not reread the whole text at all or do so quickly, attempting to edit mistakes they are sure are in their texts without the confidence or strategies to find and correct them. Mirlande said she does not like to reread her papers because "I feel like when I read them, I think everything is wrong.... When I read something I write in Engish, it doesn't make make sense to me." They have little if any sense of revision; Stage 1 writers think of revision as editing or adding more, not as re-conceiving or re-organizing texts.

Stage 1 Writers' Ability to Handle Content

Stage 1 writers tend to produce brief, superficial texts. They write primarily from experience, narrating or reporting without reference to anything learned from reading. Their texts do not reflect the writers' abilities to think on different levels of complexity; for example, these writers often have difficulty with analysis, cause and

effect relationships, or finding commonalities. Stage 1 writers may try to follow a formula, such as a three-paragraph theme, but generally do not fully understand or know how to develop the content of what they call an "introduction," "body," or "conclusion." Sandy said, "Usually when I write, I have the beginning, middle and the end inside inside, and at least just a slight idea about it; if I don't, I usually can't even write a paper." While organizing ideas, they are often unsure of when and how to paragraph. Mirlande stated, "When I'm writing, I don't know what I'm thinking. I just write. Maybe I'm thinking of something, but I don't know exactly what I'm thinking." Even when there may be relatively few "mistakes" in their texts, it is not necessarily evidence of control, but rather the result of writing what little they know how to write and the fear of taking risks. They produce the "appearance" of a text without either much thought or content.

Needs of Stage 1 Writers

In what ways must a Stage 1 writer develop in order to become more proficient, to mature to another stage of development? Based on the data from Brooks (1985) and other similar studies (Emig, 1971; Perl, 1978; Pianko, 1979; Chelala, 1981; Peitzman, 1981; Sommers, 1981; Lay, 1982; Zamel, 1982), we might hypothesize that Stage 1 writers need to develop more fluency in composing and confidence to take risks, to overcome a tendency to constrain their composing or to avoid it altogether, often as a consequence of their focus on and fear of error. In addition, more experience reading and writing in English may increase comfort with and competence in written forms of language as well as adding to the resources available to them for composing. Such

resources could help Stage 1 writers to extend their abilities to handle different types of content and to think on more varied levels of complexity, beyond reporting their experiences and observations. Perhaps most importantly, if Stage 1 writers can develop greater fluency and confidence in composing -- through gaining more language ability, reading experience, and opportunities to write purposefully -- they might then be flexible about the ways in which they compose; they might also be more open and willing to invest themselves in drafting, rereading, revising, and editing. They might begin to take pleasure in written language or at least feel more comfortable about it instead of feeling, as Mirlande put it,

> "The reason I'm always asking you that (if her text "made sense") is because maybe I feel my paper, what I wrote for the (writing assessment) exam didn't make sense. I feel like my writing doesn't make sense to anyone."

Personal Characteristics of Stage 2 Writers

ESL writers at Stage 2 may be anxious or frustrated by limitations in English, but they are not as blocked about composing as Stage 1 writers. One reason for this is they generally have more experience and confidence in reading and writing, abilities which may have been developed in a first language. Roxana explained how she made use of her first language to check herself in English:

> "When I write, sometimes I need to be sure what I'm saying in English. In English maybe I can find correct, but if I go to Spanish I can find mistakes sometimes."

Although they may not have extensive experience as readers or writers,

the fact that they can and have read and written in one language gives them some confidence they can progress in English as well. They may not invest much more in writing than students at Stage 1, but neither are they as paralyzed by or alienated from it.

Language Proficiency of Stage 2 Writers

A major difference between writers of Stage 1 and Stage 2 is that the latter have both linguistic and rhetorical knowledge and skills, perhaps developed while reading and writing in their first language, which they are able to make use of when composing in English. These writers have a clearer understanding of readers' expectations from experiences with written language, and are more likely to draw on memories of written language to guide linguistic choices when composing; for example, Roxana indicated her effort to remember sentences she has seen as well as heard before as follows:

> "I wrote 'looks' but then I said that I think the better, the correct word is 'seems' because I remember that many, in some papers I saw that word, we say 'it seems right,' 'looks,' I think that they have almost the same meaning, but 'seems' I think that 'seems' is the correct. Maybe because I hear it before, or sometimes I learn a new word, I try to remember a sentence, you know, that I saw in the book, and I said, 'It could be this one or that one.'"

Although they may also rely on what sounds "right" to correct surface errors, they are able to use their eye for and memory of written language for more complex levels of development and revision. Generally, they are better prepared and more likely to apply what they have learned about language and writing. They have some knowledge and

control of ways in which language works in general, at least in one language, with which to guide decisions about forms of language when composing. In addition, they may have more familiarity with academic, written language as a result of more extensive reading experience.

The Composing Process of Stage 2 Writers

Stage 2 writers tend to use more flexible and varied strategies than writers at Stage 1. As a result of previous reading and writing experience, they have a clearer sense of audience and organization. Although they may also rely on a formula for organizing texts, usually they are better prepared to develop a context for readers, having read what other writers have done and having had more practice accommodating various readers. Generally Stage 2 writers pause, reread and edit at the word- or sentence-level, as Stage 1 writers do, but do not focus on, nor are constrained by, a fear of error. Even if these writers may not revise naturally or automatically, they often have a sense of varied strategies, such as beginning a second draft at a different point in a story from the first for a different effect, in order to revise. Roxana had begun her third paper by describing women's present day role options; her second draft began with the past, and she explained the change in this way:

> "Later I took the other page and I start with 'A long time ago...' because I think that I am comparing the woman now and some years ago, and I said I prefer to write, I prefer to start to write about a time ago, but because, how can I tell you? It's like giving an introduction and then continuing now."

They need to develop further, both as language users and writers of English, but have a stronger base on which to build and face fewer obstacles than Stage 1 writers.

Stage 2 Writers' Ability to Handle Content

Stage 2 writers produce fairly underdeveloped, superficial texts, but are able to write more extensively than those at Stage 1. They too rely on personal experience for most of their content, yet are able to generalize on a higher level than Stage 1 writers and may make at least indirect use of reading, both for generating and organizing ideas. They have a sense of composing as something done in order to influence or inform others even if they lack strategies for and knowledge of how to do so. Roxana's description of how she decided to end her third paper reflects her intention:

> "I decided to finish with my, you know, with what I think about it (the roles of women). You know I said that I think that woman has to have a goal because now we have, we are equal, like me, and the woman who doesn't want, and here I suppose that I gonna give this page to another woman. Maybe I try to convince her to study, to do something else."

"They are more likely to reflect on or speculate about a given topic than to analyze, draw relationships or synthesize extensively or with control. Since these writers do not limit their composing deliberately, they generally write more and take greater risks with the language they use in attempts to create meaning. Nonetheless, their texts reflect ideas not clearly or fully developed.

Needs of Stage 2 Writers

The fact that Stage 2 writers seem fluent or confident does not mean they are knowledgable of or experienced in ways in which composing can be useful to them. Their fluency and confidence may be built upon to help them develop in clarity and correctness, awareness of and ability to anticipate the needs and expectations of readers as well as in knowledge of and control over forms of standard written English. In addition, they can be encouraged to increase their flexibility as writers by, for example, varying the strategies they use when composing and for developing different topics. Perhaps most importantly, even though Stage 2 writers may be better prepared for continuing their development than those at Stage 1, not being as inhibited or constrained, they are still not necessarily invested in it. Consider the following remark from Roxana about editing:

> "Sometimes when you write, you have to concentrate, and its depend how you feel. Sometimes you don't feel good to write today and you write, you think that you, you just write to finish what you're supposed to do, but when you feel nice and you want to write, you can do something better than when you don't want."

Greater fluency in getting ideas on paper and more flexibility with strategies for developing their own voice as writers are likely to inspire and sustain their concern for clarity and correctness.

Personal Characteristics of Stage 3 Writers

Stage 3 ESL writers are generally confident and proficient users of their own languages, both spoken and written forms, and

clearly working towards accomplishing that same goal in English.[27] For example, Norma acknowledged she is confident that she will write as well in English as she does in French, despite her difficulties, at some future point:

> "I feel that I would write the same way I write in French in English since I know what I am capable of in French, then I realize that I am far away writing well in English."

They have usually had extensive experience reading and writing, whether they enjoy reading and writing on their own or not, and may gauge their progress in writing English by their sense of what they already know they can do when reading and writing in another language. Another Stage 2 writer, Kwong-Uie told me the following about himself:

> "For me specifically, in Mandarin I can handle quite well. I can write very quickly in Mandarin anytime. But in English and in Malay, I can hardly write well because I didn't know much about them, the vocabulary or what to write or how to express the idea."

Even if these writers feel frustrated by or hesitant about their English ability, they see their texts as in some way representing who they are, possibly as a result of previous experiences with written language and what it can do in both academic and non-academic situations. They are generally willing to invest time and effort to make texts satisfactory to themselves as well as to others because they have experienced such satisfaction.

Language Proficiency of Stage 3 Writers

ESL students at this stage often have a sophisticated awareness of and sensitivity to language. Norma explained how she tries to make use of words or expressions she has read and sometimes will write down two or three choices, reflect on them, and pick the one that seems closest to what she is trying to express:

> "Maybe I would put it in English easier if I wasn't concerned about the distinction in nuance because, maybe that's bad with me, but I always want to get the right word, to, to, to be explicit, so the person who's going to read me can understand my point."

As experienced readers and writers, despite lacking certain knowledge and skills in English, they are trying to find a balance between what they know can be done with language and what they are capable of doing at a particular stage in their second language development. While writing his second paper on occupational choice and adjustment, Kwong-Uie made a number of changes in the beginning:

> "Just I like to start the beginning more interesting way. In normally, most people write with 'I always" to be something what you want to be, so it's really not so nice, so I change it and say, write, rewrite my beginning 'To be an engineer is always my dream' to give a clear picture of what is the career."

They are less likely to rely on their ear for English if they have not been in the United States very long; they must depend on what they have learned about English through classes in their own countries or here and through reading and writing. One consequence is that their use of

English may not be particularly idiomatic, but is frequently more academic, including a greater variety of vocabulary and structures than the language used by writers at other stages; in other words, the English they use has frequently been developed within academic circumstances.

The Composing Process of Stage 3 Writers

Stage 3 ESL writers generally are competent writers with limited proficiency in English. They come into the English composition classroom with a good deal of knowledge of and experience in composing, but are restricted by second language limitations. These writers have ideas to write about, usually know how to focus and organize texts for readers, can make use of various strategies for developing ideas, and understand connections between form and meaning (language and ideas). Generally they can devise ways into a text, for example, by questioning, outlining, or using a quote from something they have read. Kwong-Uie, for example, used a question from the article he had read to guide his second text, combining the author's ideas and his own:

> "First of all, I had to refer to the textbook to decide which one is more easily appeared to me. It seemed to me the first one (question) is more easy to write because it's more in your interest, motivation, and something of my own too, in order to be an engineer."

Norma had had a lot of ideas about the topic (occupational choice and adjustment) of her second paper but was concerned about where to begin; she described her means of starting as follows:

> "I finally decided to get some help from the questions in the (text)book, and then I said, "If I make a question, I'm going to start because I would have to answer it, and then I would start."

They may pause, rescan, draft and revise in ways similar to proficient native writers. They also distinguish between revision and editing, using each to bring ideas and the language they have used to express them more closely together. Since they generally have the ability to gauge what a writing task demands, they are often more pressured by time limits than Stage 1 or 2 writers are, as indicated by Kwong-Uie:

> "Especially when I run out of time, I can't think of any ideas at all. In other word, I can't write anymore if I know that my time is running out. Even though have another half an hour and yet I'm on the first page only, I can't write anymore."

Stage 3 writers are more likely and able to draft and revise texts, time permitting, and make use of whatever time they have to rework texts on numerous levels. Norma wrote in pencil and constantly erased portions of her text after rereading; partially this was due to concern about the appearance of her text, but there was another reason:

> "When I have to write something, I always pick up a pencil because I have the feeling that I will always have to re-work it."

Despite rereading, revision and editing, their texts may contain a greater number of errors than those of writers at other levels. Their errors reflect a lack of control but are also evidence of greater risks undertaken in efforts toward more complex writing.

Stage 3 Writers' Ability to Handle Content

ESL writers at this stage generally produce extensive, sophisticated texts in which the thinking and content are mainly limited by the writer's abilities in English. The writers may still need to develop their knowledge of English vocabulary and structures and also lack experience with some rhetorical patterns and devices. Nonetheless, the texts reflect the writers' abilities to think on different levels of complexity and express themselves on a variety of subjects. These writers are usually able to reflect, analyze, draw relationships, speculate and synthesize in writing. They tend to have a highly developed sense of their role as writer, what a reader may expect or need, and numerous means of developing their texts to suit the purpose they envision. Kwong-Uie acknowledged adding to his first text in order to accommodate his reader:

> "Because I know that this whole paper is about road accident, so I think is very important for the reader to know what is the size of my motorcycle, because I know I going to write about a motorbike racing. That's why I think it important for them to know about what is the size of the motorcycle."

Although the effectiveness of the texts may be influenced by the writers' linguistic limitations, readers will recognize the writer working within those limitations.

The Needs of Stage 3 Writers

Stage 3 ESL writers may be proficient writers in one language and enter the ESL composition classroom with extensive experience with

written language which has provided them with opportunities to develop confidence, flexibility, and a sense of voice as writers. When Norma and I discussed one session in which she had written despite only two hours' sleep, she said:

> "Yes, I did because I had to. Yes, because I know that I have, without false modesty, a good deal of natural ability. I'm very concerned about responsibility since if I have to do something, okay I will do. I am a student. I come to school to have a diploma, to graduate, so before I came here, I knew that I was going to have homeworks to do. That's why, even when I can't write, I just do it."

They need to develop fluency and proficiency in English, but have already developed a concern for clarity and correctness, which can be nurtured further, that writers at other stages do not seem to have yet. Kwong-Uie rarely made changes while writing a first draft:

> "I just write out everything that came to my mind because I know that I had corrected (would correct) it the second time so I did not pay much attention to this."

Generally, they may benefit from further reading and writing in English; specifically, in regard to writing, they may develop further if provided with opportunities to build and stretch their abilities and strategies while receiving response and support from readers. Most importantly, overemphasizing concerns for correctness in English might inhibit their confidence and fluency as writers, constraining rather than enhancing their development as writers of English.

Implications for Further Research

ESL professionals can benefit from examining the literature on composing of both native and non-native students because our students are developing simultaneously as language users and writers. Placement of ESL students into developmental courses on the basis of a university-wide writing test may not be sufficiently "accurate" to distinguish the degree of skill among these students. This study demonstrated that a group of students who were considered "unskilled" on the basis of such an exam were not equally "unskilled" writers but represented a range of skills and knowledge of composing. A series of stages which writers pass through as they develop proficiency in composing is suggested. The findings should be confirmed, refined and possibly revised based on new data through future research.

It would be useful to consider longer study periods. Writers at each stage might be examined to develop understanding of what they can or cannot do. At Stage 1, for example, when a writer is mainly developing fluency, which types or sources of response from a reader elicit greater fluency and which inhibit it? How do particular types of instruction affect writers at different stages? Research designs could allow for more numerous perspectives of writers, such as if and when they choose to revise, how they decided to make changes, and what reactions they have to comments from readers, especially readers who are not teachers.

This study examined college students, but many of the problems and successes of these students began earlier. Cummins' work (1980) regarding age of arrival and students' cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP) appears supported by the differences found among

this study's participants. Future research could increase understanding of how students developing composing proficiency in a second language are aided or impeded by their L1 level of development as writers. Since acquisition of composing proficiency does not appear, from these findings, to be dependent on oral proficiency, it would be worthwhile to investigate which factors do exert influence.

Implications for Teaching

If these stages of development are confirmed, they might influence ways teachers assist writers in developing competence. Some implications go beyond what individual classroom teachers can do or even what programs can set up for students. Neither a teacher nor an ESL program can arrange at what age or under what circumstances students come to the United States or how students begin learning English or how to write.

Nonetheless, this study confirms the findings of previous studies and provides further insights into how ESL college students compose, especially for distinguishing levels of skill. One major implication is that ESL students are individuals who, despite being placed in a course on the basis of similar scores on a writing assessment test, come into class with different histories and abilities. If a teacher recognizes that a given student lacks cognitive/academic language proficiency, such proficiency must be developed at least in the second language if that is the language the student must function in at present. Teachers may need to distinguish between students who are learning to write, particularly higher level skills involved in academic discourse, and those who are learning.

English.

A second implication is that ESL writers who lack experience and confidence as readers and writers in any language may need opportunities to develop both in English before they are able to acquire more strategies for writing or a more complex knowledge and use of English. Students who are not fluent writers in any language may deliberately constrain their writing. One consequence may be their unwillingness to involve themselves or invest time in composing. Teachers may be able to help such students by creating opportunities for them to exert control over what they write about and how they pace their composing.

Thirdly, even when students develop some fluency in writing, they may be constrained by a focus on and fear of error. Although study of and practice with grammar may not be eliminated, it cannot substitute for students' development in composing. Teachers can help students develop confidence and fluency as writers which may increase their concern with clarity and form.

Another implication is that teachers may be more useful to students during the composing process, rather than at the end, helping them learn to generate, shape, and reshape ideas for writing. Teacher-student conferences, perhaps similar to those done during this study, may allow both teachers and students to observe and discuss the student's composing process. Greater information and understanding were gained about the writers and their composing processes during this study through these discussions than could be found by looking only at texts that students produced.

In addition, students may also benefit from sharing and

discussing writing and writing processes with each other to gain awareness of alternative strategies, develop sensitivity to readers, sharpen their ability to anticipate readers' needs and expectations, and decrease dependence on teachers. Particularly in relation to decreasing dependence on teachers, students may benefit from working with other students, to develop their sense of an audience beyond a teacher.

Finally, these findings indicate students may benefit from being asked to account for changes made in their writing or writing process to probe their own thinking further. Lay (1984a) stated that, "The more they [the students] understand the process, the more they are able to improve their writing skills." Improving their English writing proficiency is very important to the ESL participants in this study. Unless they improve, they may not be able to stay in college and accomplish their goals. At least as important for the less skilled (Stage 1) writers is that it may be their first opportunity to consider themselves writers in any language.

## Questions for Post-Writing Discussions of Sessions 1, 2 and 4: Composing Process

1. I would like you to tell me briefly what you wrote about. (Paraphrase)

2. Would you read your paper aloud to me?

3. How did you begin? How did you decide what to write?

4. What, if any, changes did you make? Why? (Or, if applicable, "At this point you stopped writing. Can you tell me why you stopped and what you were thinking?")

5. What, if any, problems did you have? Any questions?

6. How did you decide when/where to stop? If you were going to revise, what changes would you make?

In addition, at the end of the fourth session, the students were asked:

The first two times you wrote, you wrote at school and reported into a tape recorder. The third time, you were asked to think about and write a text on a topic of your choice at home, reporting in once a day to a tape recorder. How did this change make you feel? Did you notice any difference in the way you worked?

Questions for the Personal Interview, Session 3

1. What do you remember about how you learned to read and write in your first language?

2. When and where did you first learn English? In what ways did you learn?

3. What kinds of writing have you done in either language? How often do you write in either language? What are your strengths and weaknesses when you write in either language?

4. What kinds of reading do you do in either language? How often do you read?

5. What would you say a "good writer" is?

6. Is there anything that I have not asked about that you would like to add or bring up?

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